

# SPIN

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THAT  
ROCKS!

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VON BONDIES VS.  
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## COURTNEY LOVE

NEW ALBUM =  
CRAZY GOOD

CHAIR-THROWING,  
GUITAR-SMASHING,  
TREE-HUGGING?  
IT'S THE RETURN OF

# THE VINES

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# editor's letter

When the Strokes, the White Stripes, the Hives, and the Vines emerged in 2002, music magazines (like *Spin*) hailed a "new-rock" movement that was revitalizing a genre stale with cartoonish rap metal and formulaic post-grunge. Critics raved about the return to guitars and smart songwriting; fans were bemused by the bands' goofy sense of cool. Rock seemed to *matter* again. But naysayers called the music too retro and uncommercial to help rock regain its position as the driving force in youth culture. Nearly two years later, the industry is still undecided. In 2003, the White Stripes and the Strokes returned with acclaimed releases and respectable sales. In 2004, we await the Vines, the Hives, and second-wave acts like Jack White punching bags the Von Bondies (see feature on page 80).

Australia's Vines have a lot to prove. Many still dis singer Craig Nicholls as a Kurt wannabe, thanks to the Nirvana-inflected garage-grunge hit "Get Free." Nicholls is also notorious for his onstage tantrums and drunken freak-outs. Assistant editor Sarah Lewitinn once witnessed a bizarre incident at a Manhattan bar. "The DJ put on a Supergrass song, and Craig was so happy he poured a bucket of water over his head," she says. "He got kicked out, so he started running in front of moving cars. He jumped into a garbage can and then tried to scale a building. This all happened in about 60 seconds!"

This is the part of the editor's letter where I'm supposed to tell you that senior writer Marc Spitz "discovered another side" to Nicholls' personality when he interviewed the Vines for this month's cover story. But Spitz took a 14-hour flight to Sydney only to confirm that the singer is indeed a bratty, paranoid, self-described "compulsive liar." "I wanted to hit Craig Nicholls," Spitz writes. (Fortunately, he didn't. Spitz has yet to attack a rock star, though he *did* once spend the night in jail after a bar fight.) However, Spitz notes that Nicholls has grown immensely as a songwriter, as heard on *Winning Days*. "I think the Vines write psychedelic pop music that's on par with the Flaming Lips' best stuff," Spitz says. "If they were homely and ironic and dropped balloons on the audience, rock snobs would adore them."

New rock scored big in our annual Readers Poll, with the Strokes sweeping the major categories. To see how your taste measures up against ours, we conducted our very first *Spin* Staff Poll, with 18 writers, editors, and designers weighing in. The conclusion? We all think Karen O rules.

**Best Band:** (ridiculous six-way tie) Coldplay, Death Cab for Cutie, OutKast, Radiohead, the Strokes, the White Stripes

**Worst Band:** Limp Bizkit

**Best Solo Artist:** (tie) Cat Power, Missy Elliott

**Worst Solo Artist:** John Mayer

**Best New Artist:** The Darkness

**Worst New Artist:** Clay Aiken

**Best Song:** "Hey Ya!" OutKast

**Worst Song:** "The Boys of Summer," the Ataris

**Sex God:** (three-way tie) Andre 3000, Julian Casablancas, Justin Timberlake

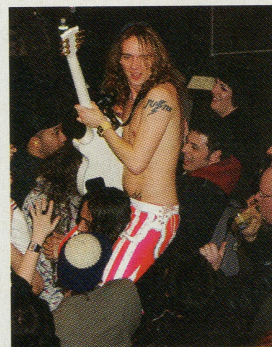
**Sex Goddess:** (tie) Beyoncé, Karen O

**Most Underrated:** Liz Phair

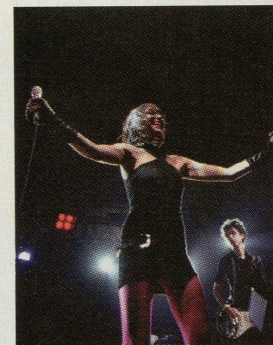
**Most Overrated:** (three-way tie) 50 Cent, the Strokes, Justin Timberlake

**Best Live Act:** Yeah Yeah Yeahs

SIA MICHEL EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



Winners of the first-annual *Spin* Staff Poll: clockwise from top right, Julian Casablancas of the Strokes, Missy Elliott, Karen O of Yeah Yeah Yeahs, Justin Hawkins of the Darkness, Andre 3000 of OutKast



"Okay, now let's climb the lamp-post and scream at old ladies! Guys? Guys?": scenes from the Vines cover shoot in Sydney, Australia





# The Fits and Curvy

Representing Australia in the great rock'n'roll revival, **the Vines** made a big racket by fusing the Beach Boys' sweetness with Nirvana's power. Along the way, quixotic frontman **Craig Nicholls** earned a rep as an unstable genius with a self-destructive streak a thousand miles long. Will the release of their second album, **Winning Days**, and a newly solid lineup finally mellow him? Or will he continue to act his rage?

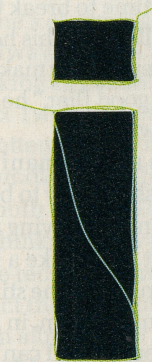
By Marc Spitz  
Photographs by  
James Dimmock





Tree's company: Ryan Griffiths, Craig Nicholls, Hamish Rosser, and Patrick Matthews in Sydney, Australia on January 7





wanted to hit Craig Nicholls. I had determined that the Vines' 27-year-old leader was a hopeless, infuriating interview subject, and I had traveled 8,000 miles to conduct a major question-and-answer session in which he'd directly revealed...almost nothing. There are al-Qaeda detainees at Camp Delta who are more likely to give up information to their interrogators.

"I am really [self-] conscious in interviews," he admits early during our conversation on his home turf of Sydney, Australia. "I don't want to say anything bad about any people or places." I should have known. The last time we spoke, backstage at the *Late Show With David Letterman* in August 2002, shortly after he'd thrown a tray of food at his publicist and just before he'd trashed the band's setup during a performance of their hit single, "Get Free," I asked him to tell me something about the Vines that nobody would suspect. "We like cookies," he replied, after nearly ten minutes of discomforting silence. "But we don't like grapes."

But one's desire to hurt Craig Nicholls eventually subsides. After spending some time in his company, observing his various tics and waiting out his pauses, I soon discovered, as do many of the people who deal with Nicholls (his bandmates, his record-label reps, his managers, possibly his new girlfriend, definitely his producer), that there are ways of understanding and coexisting with him without resorting to violence. Even when *he* resorts to violence.

First, you must realize and—despite your cynicism—actually *believe* that even when it's quiet, as it is on this muggy, lazy summer afternoon in the Southern Hemisphere, there is loud, wholly distracting, ostensibly beautiful music in Nicholls' head. He prefers listening to it than doing just about anything else. Second, you must indulge this. If you happen to be a journalist, you have to wait, often several minutes, maybe longer, for him to speak. And don't make any sudden movements. Greeting him with an innocuous "Good to see you again" might



prompt a short nod of recognition or a vacant stare. "You have to be onstage in ten minutes, and after the show there's a meet-and-greet, then we take the tour bus to Houston—that's in Texas" might conjure a whirlwind of flying furniture, beer bottles, deli platters, ashtrays, and bong water. Both verbal engagements pose the same threat to Nicholls. They interrupt his beautiful inner noise.

"Craig is addicted to the combination of smoking pot and listening to music," observes the Vines' even-tempered bassist Patrick Matthews, a longtime friend of Nicholls' who as a teen had flipped burgers with him at McDonald's. "That's become, like, his life," he says, adding, "Pot unlocked music for me to start with, but then the noise in my head got to be too much." Those closest to Nicholls have gotten so good at abiding his fixation that frequently they don't even flinch when the debris starts flying. "Sometimes we'd be at a venue, and Craig would start throwing chairs around, and someone from the record company would say, 'Oh, my God! Is he all right?'" the band's blond surfer-dude drummer Hamish Rosser says. "And the other three of us would be sitting around, going [*pretends to yawn*], 'Eh, is he throwing chairs again?'"

There are quiet moments between Nicholls' inner euphony and cacophony. In these instances, he is able to respond with logic and almost perfect simplicity, even wit. We enter the Royal Botanic Gardens, accompanied by his affable comanager Andy Kelly and his new girlfriend, British goth-rock singer Dirty Harry. Although he is dressed haphazardly, in a black, Asian-silk ladies' blouse (most likely hers) over an inside-out Minutemen T-shirt, with widely flared jeans that drag on the ground, he seems relatively happy (at *Letterman* he was unmistakably miserable). Harry and Kelly leave us and we sit. Nicholls swats away a fly, then another, but says nothing. I figure it's time to break the ice by asking how he, a touring rock musician who still lives in his hometown (the Sydney suburb of Hurstville), manages to repeatedly make the brutal 14-hour trip across the Pacific. "I think I'm a good flier," he answers, "in that I haven't been in a plane that's gone down."

In these moments of lucidity, Nicholls can also be manipulative, even dishonest. For example, I was told that I should try to bond with him over the videogames that he supposedly enjoys playing for hours in his bedroom. I don't play videogames, but it seems like a harmless way to get a pleasant chat rolling. When I mention them, he stiffens and looks around nervously to see if anyone's listening. Then, in a hushed stammer, he replies, "I'm sure I have played videogames. I can't remember. I guess they're all right. I don't want to say anything bad about videogames," before surveying the area for eavesdroppers. It should be noted that we are sitting on a hilly section of a sprawling great lawn. With the exception of an ibis and the folks riding paddle boats and water taxis in Sydney Harbour, there's nobody within 25 yards.

Videogames are legal in Australia, as they are everywhere else. Marijuana is not. As his bassist attests, Craig Nicholls smokes a lot of pot. "I don't smoke pot," Nicholls says, when I bring up the subject, noting his symptoms of classic stoner paranoia. "I don't see how anyone could smoke pot every day and still have any sanity left in their brain. I almost find that insulting." He stares at me hard. Suspiciously. Then, again at the invisible spies. I assure him that I am not a cop. "I'm a rock journalist." It doesn't ease him a bit.

Nicholls knows that sitting on hills with rock journalists is necessary when there's an album to promote (the Vines' sophomore effort, *Winning Days*, on Capitol), but he doesn't seem concerned with how he or the band will be portrayed. "I don't care," he says, pulling up grass and staring at his black sneakers. "Obviously, it's good for us if people like our album." I already know he's fibbing. That morning, I received a call from the band's management asking me not to tell Nicholls that I'd interviewed Rosser the previous evening and am set to fly to Melbourne for a sit-down with Matthews (second guitarist Ryan Griffiths never gives interviews). It's implicit that informing him of this might jeopardize his participation. It seems that Nicholls would be more comfortable if he were the only Vine being uncomfortable with the press.







—  
“I may be barking  
mad, but at least I’m  
no sap”: Nicholls

“Are the Vines democratic?” I ask him leadingly (hey, it’s better than clocking him). “Or is it just unequivocally your band?” He ponders this for a moment. A smirk crinkles his boyish face. “Well, there’s *part* of it that’s my band. Like the vocals.” Sensing my frustration with his vague responses, he’ll later admit, “I’m a compulsive liar. I don’t even know myself when I’m lying, so it’s very confusing.” It’s during such moments that Craig Nicholls becomes a much more interesting interview.

**O**f all the bands in the recent new-rock revolution, the Vines seemed most likely to self-destruct and the least likely to pull off a credibility-securing second act (as have both the Strokes and the White Stripes). Even uniformed, bravado-spewing Swedes the Hives (who will also release a new album this year) are taken more seriously by cred-conscious rock fans, despite monikers like Dr. Matt Destruction and Chris Dangerous. When the Vines shared the stage with the Hives at MTV’s 2002 Video Music Awards in a garage-rock battle of the bands (after the Strokes declined), many claimed that they were cashing in on a genuine phenomenon, in the same way that Seattle bands like Candlebox were accused of hitching onto the Nirvana/Pearl Jam bandwagon a decade earlier. Although the hyperbole-prone U.K. press predicted that within a year the band would be bigger than U2, many who welcomed the Strokes and the Stripes as rock saviors dismissed the Vines as one-hit wonders, concocted in the studio, boy-band style. Nicholls seemed too cute, too Kurt Lite to be taken seriously. Even Dave Grohl told *Spin* in January 2003, “Avril Lavigne’s song [‘Sk8er Boi’] is more challenging than [‘Get Free’].”

“I wonder if I was on the outside, [if I would dismiss us, too],” Matthews tells me the following day, over a few pints at downtown Melbourne’s charmingly dilapidated Builders Arms Hotel. “Because there’s always, like, a picture of us as a band and then a picture of Craig looking all beautiful. I would probably be like, ‘You look a bit like Matchbox Twenty,’ myself.”

“I’ve gotten slagged many times [for working with the Vines],” says veteran producer Rob Schnapf (Elliott Smith, Foo Fighters, Beck), who helmed both their 2002 debut, *Highly Evolved*, and *Winning Days*. “People think they have just one song. It’s like they haven’t listened to the whole record. I don’t get what there is not to get.”

The fact that the Vines were the last of the big four “the” bands to release an album (after the Strokes, the White Stripes, and the Hives—sorry, the Mooney Suzuki) and were the highest to chart in the U.S. (at No. 11) might have contributed to a backlash. But according to Matthews, there’s always been one. The complaint: In the Sydney scene, it was believed that seasoned acts like Powderfinger were the ones who deserved to be discovered by a powerful management team on the strength of a homemade demo, flown to Los Angeles to work with an A-list producer, and sell more than 650,000 albums.

“[People say,] ‘Oh, you’ve gotta work it for ten years,’” Matthews says, mockingly. “‘Powderfinger are a band that deserve this.’ I don’t mind if people don’t like us, and I don’t mind if people point out our faults, but this whole thing about deserving it is a bit stupid. You can’t trick that many people into buying a record.”

Ah, but if you do enough stupid shit on your promotional tours, you can trick them into believing you’re one insane Australian. “People think Craig’s dumb,” says Matthews. “Some people get him, and some people don’t, and they just treat him like a moron. That’s always funny.” All four Vines live performances I’ve witnessed had moments of genuine excitement, but the instrument-throttling chaos that occurred at every show quickly became a cliché. Maybe it was once a great spontaneous punk-rock release, but Nicholls’ gear abuse eventually seemed a sort of choreographed temper tantrum, akin to a child acting out because he didn’t get the pony he wanted for Christmas.

“I’d found that there is creativity within a band’s performance [as well as in recording], and I wanted to expand on that,” Nicholls says, cryptically justifying the destruction. “I don’t want to put out this image as



Hit the bricks:  
Nicholls rehearses  
for the *Crouching  
Tiger* sequel

some crazy person. But, you know, sometimes I can hiss like a snake. I mean, literally, like a snake. I give myself a scare every once in a while."

"What do you do when that happens?" I ask him.

"I ride the snake. That's what Jim Morrison said, right?"

The real reason for the violence was that every day is Christmas in Craig Nicholls' private world (ponies trot freely). And while supporting a hot album, he was dragged out of it every night. Nicholls is a studio rat in the body of a skinny, dreamy rock star (the Vines were name-checked in last year's Disney remake of *Freaky Friday* as the major influence on Lindsay Lohan's band, Pink Slip). And he actually has more in common with Brian Wilson than apparent mental instability. Most of *Highly Evolved* sounds nothing like "Get Free" or the similarly screamed follow-up single, "Outtathaway." The acoustic, psychedelic pop of "Autumn Shade," "Country Yard," and "Homesick" are delicate in melody, soaked in intricate harmony, and reminiscent of the Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds* and Love's *Forever Changes*. Not that you'd have known it from watching Nicholls garble them live while getting tangled in the mic cord or pushing the drums off their riser. "I don't know how many times I had to repair my kit," says Rosser. "Hundreds!"

As the Vines continued to tour, Nicholls felt lost and exhausted. As he got farther and farther away from the studio and his bedroom—with the headphones and the pile of Muse and Suede CDs—the public and private fits became a serious liability. "I'd just look at my feet even more," Matthews says of the later concerts. "Or look over at Hamish and raise my eyebrows." Then came the *Letterman* debacle and a scheduled appearance on *The Tonight Show With Jay Leno* in December 2002 that never even made it past sound check. "Craig started smashing stuff, and the producers just sort of said, 'Go!'" Matthews remembers. "Andy Kelly had to carry him out."

While riding the snake during a show at Cambridge, Massachusetts' Middle East club that same month, Nicholls struck Matthews hard in the head with his microphone. Although the bassist now dismisses the incident as an accident, there was a report that Nicholls went off on him after Matthews broke a string. A soft-spoken former medical student, Matthews is two years Nicholls' senior and the kind of guy who likes a pint, a good book, and a Smiths record at medium volume. "But when I got hit in the head, I guess that's when I lost my rational side," he says. The band cut short their set, trashed their dressing room, and then took it outside. "Patrick chased Craig down the street trying to knock him out," Rosser says. "Pretty heavy times."

Dates in the U.S., U.K., and Japan were canceled, and it seemed like the band had finally hit the wall—hard. "Get Free" would have to stand as their one great hit in the big *Rock of the 20s* compilation graveyard. But the Vines are a strange band from a land famous for strange things: the



chicken-flavored potato chip, the pig-nosed turtle, the movie *Dogs in Space*. "I used to think about quitting a lot," Matthews admits. "Pretty much for the first and second tour of the U.S. I was just like, 'I don't wanna do this.' All the time. Me and Craig weren't getting along. I went from being a hardworking student to someone who drank every night of the week, and that was making me unhappy. There was a lot of tension having to live with the others in the bus." Looking back on the 2002 tour, Rosser says, "I actually learned to pass up free drinks and free drugs. That's one thing that will help me survive longer on the bus."

The fact that they regrouped and are about to return as a unified force with a record that's even more accomplished than their debut is not so odd if you understand two more facts about Craig Nicholls. As far as the snake might take him, he will always stop to record the music in his head. And he really likes trees.

**The** title track of *Winning Days* is one of the band's oldest tunes (it was on the five-song demo that initially attracted Schnapf). "It's about when you're younger and it seems like simple things excite you a lot more," Nicholls says. "Like, trees seem a lot bigger." A drifting acoustic ballad, it speaks of an optimism that could not have been captured in an L.A. studio or backstage over a four-track recorder. The sentiment must be protected by foliage. Rabbits. Deer. Little snakes that are impossible to ride. I ask Schnapf if he had become wary of working with the band after hearing all the road stories. "That chaotic behavior doesn't exist in my world," he says. "Everybody is pretty much on good behavior [with me]."

Still, the decision to record album two at the legendary Bearsville Studios near Woodstock, New York, is telling. Situated in the middle of a wooded estate, Bearsville was founded by Bob Dylan's former manager, Albert Grossman. For three decades, artists have been drawn



Radio Birdman

### They Come From a Land Down Under

Six great Aussie bands not called AC/DC (or the Vines)

By Doug Brod

### RADIO BIRDMAN

**Why:** Anchored by Michigan-born guitarist Deniz Tek, these leather-jacketed pinups introduced the spirit of first-wave Detroit punk

that served as the template for such 1980s antipodean kin as the Celibate Rifles and the Scientists. One of rock's coolest logos, too. **Begin here:** *The Essential Radio Birdman* (1974–1978) (Sub Pop)

### THE SAINTS

**Why:** Before evolving into a master of swooning orchestral folk rock, Chris Bailey

pioneered bratty Aussie punk with Saints cofounder Ed Kuepper, infusing hooky anti-anthems with 1950s grit and delicious horns (as on the classic consumerist dis "Know Your Product").

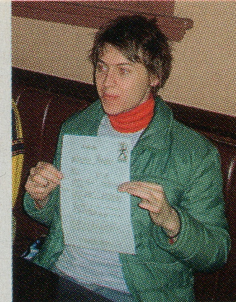
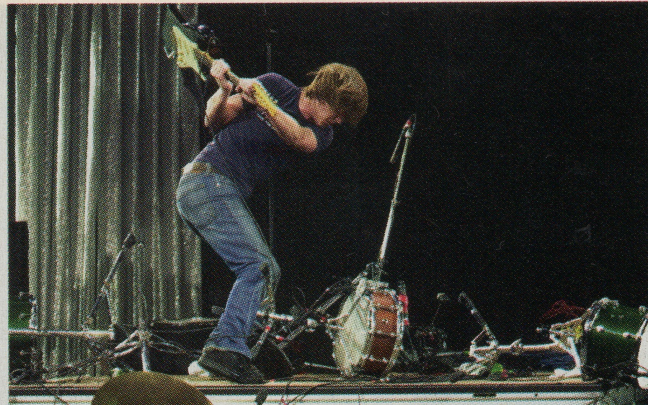
**Begin here:** *Songs of Salvation* 1976–1988 (Raven import)

### HOODOO GURUS

**Why:** Twenty years

ago, this playful, kitsch-obsessed quartet released *Stoneage Romeos*, their first collection of cartoonish garage rock, hard-edged pop, and breathtaking balladry. Bangle dating and bad headbands ensued. Due in late March: their first album of new material in eight years. **Begin here:** *Ampology* (Acadia import)





Nicholls is back: with Matthews (left) at Bearsville Studios last summer; acting up at the 2002 KROQ Almost Acoustic Christmas show; at Sydney's Enmore Theatre Café in 2001, with the band's travel itinerary for their first U.S. trip

to the tranquil surroundings (gentle-rock classics like R.E.M.'s *Automatic for the People* and Jeff Buckley's *Grace* were recorded there). The other appeal of Bearsville: There's nothing else to do. "Deer would be walking through the place all the time," Rosser says. "We even saw bears. It was like a mellow retreat."

"There was a stretch where I don't think Craig left the grounds for six weeks. And that was perfect," Schnapf says. "There was the barn—which was the studio—and the farmhouse, which was walking distance. He really likes trees and fresh air, and we're right on a stream in the woods by a field."

"It was a big weight off me," Nicholls says when I bring up Bearsville. "It was just great to actually be in the middle of recording a tune again, and it was really exciting." Apparently the loose, communal atmosphere opened up a very tightly wound unit. "After we got the first song done," Matthews says, "it was the best it's ever been within the band." Though he wasn't around for the touring mayhem, in the studio Schnapf did notice a change in Nicholls and Matthews: "[Playing live and recording are] such two different animals. You had guys who had never really left their town. Now they've toured the world, and they're a lot more experienced. They've had a loop."

*Winning Days* proves that the Vines have been evolving...highly. Although it opens with the "Get Free"-like "Ride" (surprise: it's the lead single) and segues into the ripping "Animal Machine," the psychedelia that set them apart from the Strokes and the White Stripes now predominates. It's a headphones album, crammed with quadruple-tracked harmonies, creepy Moog ("Evil Town"), odd tempo changes ("TV Pro"), Beatles-esque power pop ("She's Got Something to Say to Me"), and pastoral atmospheric ("Autumn Shade 2" features bird calls). Listen closely to the lyrics and you'll find evidence of Nicholls' buried wit. "Fuck the World," long a live favorite, has a great, crude punk-rock bass riff, but such words as "Fuck the fields, and we snared the ocean" betray it as an ecology-minded protest song, not a nihilist anthem.

"Craig once said really offhandedly, and then never returned to it: 'It's raw, yet futuristic,'" Schnapf says. "He's got a way of doing that. The primal part of his brain connects directly to his mouth without

going through the brain filter. I think that phrase kind of summed up the record in a good way."

As refined as it is, the Vines' new sound isn't so new that it will alienate fans and industry supporters. "The anticipation for the Vines is great," says Gene Sandbloom, assistant programming director at L.A. radio station KROQ. "But we're not looking forward to the Vines because they're this massive band. We're looking forward to them because they're on the front end of this whole [garage-rock] genre. Now that the genre is huge, it seems like *Winning Days* will be a slam dunk."

Most important, although the Vines are and have always been Nicholls' band, in 2004 they sound like *a* band. Rosser, an Aussie who formerly played in the Nevada-based cover band Sixties Mania!, replaced drummer David Olliffe (who quit during the recording of *Highly Evolved*) and is now a permanent member. Second guitarist Ryan Griffiths, who previously would play for only half a show, is now on every track. "This is the first step toward us becoming like Coldplay," Matthews says without a trace of insincerity, "becoming a professional band." As they get ready to hit the road for an inevitably un-Coldplay-like tour beginning in March, will Nicholls still feel the need to smash it up onstage, or will he do this new material proud? "I want Craig to sing—if not to impress, at least to not turn people away," Matthews says. "Sometimes he's just too destructive to the songs. I'm a bit sick of that. But I can see a lot of potential."

As Nicholls and I rise to walk toward the harbor I ask him, "Are you done with all that?"

"I don't know if I'm done or not," he says. "It's hard to tell."

Again, I don't bring up the sticky truth. Shortly before Christmas—just a few weeks prior to our talk—the Vines returned to live performing with a show at Sydney's Annandale Hotel. By all accounts it was shambolic as ever. But confronting Nicholls about it would be pointless. Besides, I've upset enough of his noise. I let it be and hope, like those around him, that one day soon he'll figure out how to be Chris Martin—or at least a Craig Nicholls not so hell-bent on sabotaging his own talent. I assure myself I haven't traveled 8,000 miles in vain. I now know how to handle Craig Nicholls. And I no longer want to hit him. ■

#### DIED PRETTY

**Why:** Guitar epics dripping with heartland-rock melodrama and bad-trip church organ were their specialty, peaking with 1992's stirring and majestic *Doughboy Hollow*. Their not-so-secret weapon: Ronald S. Peno, who sang like a bizarre hybrid of Jim Morrison and Gordon Lightfoot. *Seriously,*

#### Begin here:

*Outoftheunknown: The Very Best of...* (Citadel import)

#### YOU AM I

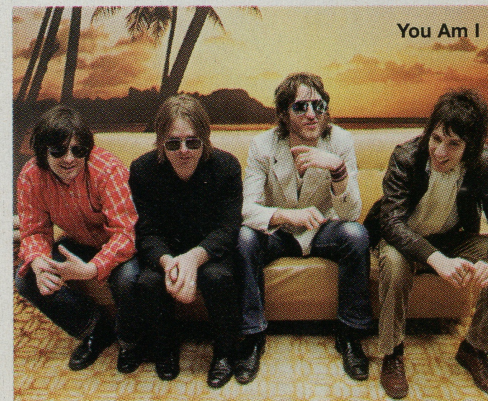
**Why:** Despite a handful of U.S. releases (including 2002's *Deliverance*), this Strokes-approved quartet—one of the most exciting live bands *anywhere*—have been more buzzed-about here

than heard. Their mod-inflected power pop recalls the Who and the Jam, but it's played with the loose gusto of the Replacements—only sober. **Begin here:** *The Cream & the Crock: The Best of You Am I* (BMG Australia import)

#### REGURGITATOR

**Why:** As their name implies, these smart-

asses—currently one of the continent's most popular home-grown acts—heave up a stew of synth pop, rap rock, three-chord punk, and Princely electro funk. But what's most refreshing is their cleverness (like releasing the chant-along "Crush the Losers" just in time for the Sydney Olympics). **Begin here:** *Jingles* (Kennel import)



You Am I